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IMPROVING THE STRUCTURE DRILL IN RUSSIAN.

BY- MORRIS, SEAN

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IF AN EFFORT WERE MADE TO HAVE STUDENTS CONTINUALLY HEAR AND PRODUCE THE LANGUAGE BEING STUDIED IN A FAIRLY REALISTIC WAY FROM THE BEGINNING, THEY WOULD BE MORE MOTIVATED TO LEARN AND WOULD MAKE THE TRANSITION FROM THE CLASSROOM TO PRACTICAL SITUATIONS AND MORE ADVANCED STUDY MORE EASILY. THE TRADITIONAL KINDS OF STRUCTURE DRILLS INCORPORATED IN MOST AUDIOLINGUAL RUSSIAN TEXTS ARE UNREALISTIC IN THE DEMANDS PUT ON THE STUDENT'S MEMORY AND ARE MEANINGLESS CITATION FORMS REQUIRING PURELY MECHANICAL RESPONSES. IF THE TEACHER, FROM THE BEGINNING LEARNING STAGES, WERE TO ASSUME THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CAREFULLY USING MASTERED STRUCTURES AND IMPORTANT VOCABULARY IN DRILLS DESIGNED TO VARY SENTENCES AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, THE CONVERSATIONAL STYLE OF THE DRILLS WOULD BE MAINTAINED BY MAKING THE STUDENTS THINK WHAT THEY ARE SAYING. FURTHERMORE, BY THE SYSTEMATIC EXPOSURE TO THE VARIOUS COMMON INTONATION PATTERNS EMPLOYED IN THESE DRILLS, THE STUDENT WOULD IMPROVE IN PRONUNCIATION. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE SLAVIC AND EAST EUROPEAN JOURNAL," VOLUME 11, NUMBER 1, SPRING 1967, PAGES 66-70. (AB)

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Improving the Structure Drill in Russian

Seán Morris, University of Wisconsin, Madison

"The students don't know what they are saying." "They are bored." Complaints like these often come from teachers who have had unfortunate experiences teaching by the audio-lingual method. For this and other reasons, many feel that a return to what is usually called the traditional approach is now in order. Of course, we are not overlooking the fact that in Russian more than in the more commonly taught languages, many teachers have never left the traditional approach and have remained remarkably impervious to advances in applied linguistics. In any event, many of the problems which seem to haunt those of us who are using the new methods can be overcome with a little imagination and willingness to spend a bit more time in preparing our lessons.

What I am suggesting is that the usual kinds of structure drills are inadequate and that any teacher who bases his teaching of grammar exclusively on them will find that he is not reaching his students. Here, for example, is a typical "accepted" way of introducing and teaching the conjugation of a verb: First comes the repetition drill, in which the students repeat (and understand, we hope) what the teacher says ("Ja igraju v šaxmaty," "Ty igraeš' v šaxmaty," "Vy igraete v šaxmaty," and so on), followed by the person-number substitution drill, in which the teacher presents a model utterance and then different subject pronouns, after which the students make the necessary changes in the utterance: "My igraem v mjač. On. Ty." "My igraem v mjač. On igraet v mjač. Ty igraeš' v mjač." This continues in chorus until the students are able to do the drill without hesitation. Next comes number substitution, which consists in having the students change the verbs and subject pronouns in a number of sentences from singular to plural and vice versa. Finally, there may be a replacement drill, e.g.:

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Teacher:	Students:
Ты играешь в шахматы.	Ты играешь в шахматы.
играю	Я играю в шахматы.
в теннис	Я играю в теннис.
Вы	Вы играете в теннис.

After this drill has been mastered, the students are supposed to "know" the verb. But what does this mean? What do they actually know? Those who have had some experience in this kind of teaching will immediately realize that a student could very easily follow all the directions, give all the responses fluently and without hesitation, and yet have only the vaguest idea what he is saying. If he is perceptive, he will understand that he has been talking about different people playing something or other. The average student, however, will find that he need not understand what he or the teacher is saying in order to complete this series of drills successfully. Comprehension is of secondary importance to him, and besides, he might have already found out that, when he thinks too much about what he is saying, it takes him longer to respond to the teacher.

There are two things wrong with this kind of presentation. First of all, the student is expected to remember the meaning of the verb *igrat'* because it was introduced to him in a dialog a few days ago in a line something like, "Xotite igrat' v šaxmaty posle užina?" It would certainly be a remarkable student who could grasp without any assistance the meaning of "Ja igraju v šaxmaty," and repeat it after the teacher at the same time. For as soon as he heard *igraju*, he would have to relate it immediately to the appropriate line in the right dialog and isolate the phrase "igrat' v šaxmaty" through some sort of intuition, because he wouldn't necessarily know how the Russian and English correspond to one another word for word. At any rate, if he gets this far, it should be relatively simple for him to drag out *ja* from somewhere else and comprehend. We are being extremely optimistic if we think that this process actually takes place in the fraction of a second the student would have.

The second failing in this series of drills is that virtually none of the utterances the student hears are meaningful to him; they are merely citation forms with no relationship to him or to reality in general. It has been my experience that overcoming this second problem leads to a solution of the first, the question of comprehension.

Many foreign language teachers have realized for a long time that the best way to liven up a class and at the same time to speed the learning process is to create in the classroom a situation in which the student uses the language in a fairly realistic fashion. What we can do is give the student an opportunity to produce something as close to real conversation as possible by having him respond to the same kinds of stimuli that one would find in a normal conversation in the foreign tongue. In other words, we should try to eliminate, to as great an extent as possible, responses of a purely mechanical nature.

With this goal in mind, let us see how it would be possible to teach the conjugation of the verb *igrat'*. The teacher might begin by having the

students repeat the line from the previously memorized dialog, "Xotite igrat' v šaxmaty posle užina?" The teacher then says, "Ja igraju v šaxmaty," and makes sure the students understand by making motions as though he were moving chessmen, perhaps, or simply by asking if they understand. Now he has the class repeat, "Ja igraju v šaxmaty," once or twice. Note that this is the only portion of this sequence that involves simple repetition. The teacher then asks the question, "Ty igraeš' v šaxmaty?" The students respond individually or in chorus. When the first person has been learned in this way, in varied sentences (the names of games and instruments can be introduced, and there is no reason for not teaching four or five different verbs of the same type simultaneously), the teacher has a student ask a classmate if he plays chess. We invariably find at this point that the students have already learned the second person singular just from hearing the teacher repeat it so many times when he was asking the questions. Now we continue and introduce the other forms of the verb, e.g., by changing the question to "Vanja igraet v tennis?" To complete the conjugation drill, the teacher has one student ask the questions of a group of other students or the teacher. This part of the sequence should take no more than six or seven minutes.

The next step would be a check to see if the students have really grasped the conjugation. This will also serve as re-enforcement and additional practice to speed up the responses. One way to do this is to ask a series of varied questions. This is similar to the person-number substitution drill but differs from it in that here the exchanges between teacher and student approximate a normal conversational pattern and the stimulus given the student is an authentic utterance rather than a citation form or replacement item such as a subject pronoun. Instead, he is asked a question he has to think about before answering. That is, he has to think what he is going to say, not what ending to put on the verb. Either or both of the following drills could be used at this point.

Teacher:	Student(s):
Я играю в волейбол, а ты?	Да, я играю в волейбол.
	Нет, я не играю в волейбол.
	Нет, я играю в теннис.
А Маша?	Маша играет в волейбол.
А Саша и Борис?	Они играют в волейбол.
А вы?	Мы играем в волейбол.

Teacher: Кто играет в шахматы? (Points to two students.)
Student(s): Игорь и Ваня играют в шахматы.
Teacher: Кто играет в пинг-понг? (Points to himself.)
Student(s): Вы играете в пинг-понг.

There are a few things the teacher should keep in mind throughout this

sequence in order to obtain the best results: He should try to vary the sentences as much as possible right from the beginning, using structures and vocabulary the students have already learned. This makes the students think about what they are saying and also maintains the conversational style of the drills. Such drills must be carefully planned because, as casual as they may seem to the students, it would be very easy for the teacher to omit structures or important vocabulary the students already know if he relied too much on memory. There need be no hard and fast rule about when the students answer individually and when they answer in chorus. This depends on the teacher, the students, and the size of the class. However, it is probably good practice to have a few choral responses in the midst of a series of individual answers. This keeps the lesson moving at a rapid pace, and it keeps the students on their toes.

As another example of more meaningful teaching of structure, let us take the possessive interrogative pronoun *čej*. First of all, we can eliminate the annoying repetition drill by starting out with questions which the students answer using the new forms. Next the teacher asks questions which call upon the students to produce the new forms themselves.

Teacher:	Student(s):
Чья это книга?	Я не знаю, чья это книга.
Чье это письмо?	Я не знаю, чье это письмо.
Чьи это карандаши?	Я не знаю, чьи это карандаши.

Teacher:	Student(s):
Это ваше место?	Нет, я не знаю, чье это место.
Это ваши вещи?	Нет, я не знаю, чьи это вещи.

Following these two drills, the students ask one another questions.

The introduction of the genitive case lends itself particularly well, I think, to this approach. In place of an extensive repetition drill on the pattern "U menja est' žurnal. . . .U menja net žurnala," which is not only meaningless, but also nonsensical, the teacher can begin by asking the students questions (the phrases *u kogo* and *u menja est'* have already been memorized): "U kogo est' žurnal?" "U menja est' žurnal." "U kogo net žurnala?" "U menja net žurnala." Such drills should employ a significant number (25–30) of nouns, and there should be three separate series of questions for masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns. After once or twice through this sequence, the students are ready to produce the genitive case themselves as they answer questions put to them either by the teacher or by classmates. If the teacher is enough of an actor, he can increase the effectiveness of this drill greatly by using props. For example, he might hand a student a pen and ask, "U tebja est' ručka?" to which the student

would reply affirmatively. Then he takes the pen away from the student and asks him the same question, this time eliciting the negative response.

Then, it is a simple matter to teach the genitive case following the preposition *u*. The teacher points to different people and asks other members of the class questions such as the following. "U Borisa est' karandaš?" "U Maši est' sestra?" "U kogo net bumagi?" These questions can be answered negatively or affirmatively. Finally, the students could ask one another similar questions.

I think it is obvious that this way of presenting and drilling structure is far more interesting and meaningful—and, consequently, more effective and more likely to leave a lasting impression on the student—than the more "traditional" kinds of pattern practice. What we are doing here is making the foreign language come alive for the student by planning our lessons so that he has an opportunity to use it to communicate, albeit in a limited fashion.

A most important side effect of this approach is that the students are constantly exposed, in a systematic manner, to various common intonation patterns, including the troublesome yes-no question, which, for speakers of English, requires a great deal of practice. Most teachers, even those who are advocates of the audio-lingual approach, do not devote nearly enough time to the problem of intonation. Teachers who will spend hours drilling students on the trilled *r* and on palatalized consonants, for example, do not feel that they have the time to do the same thing with the three or four most common intonation types. Whatever the reason for this neglect, it is a mistake, because more often than not, the impression of a foreign accent is produced rather by imposition of native intonation patterns on the second language than by mispronunciation of individual sounds.

To summarize, we should teach with a view to having the students come into contact as much as possible with language which approaches real conversation. This will be the responsibility of the teacher alone, since even the most recent texts incorporate only what I have described as the traditional types of structure drills which have not proved to be the final solution. Indeed, how much have we really improved our teaching, when frequently the chief difference between the audio-lingual approach and the "old" methods is that we now conjugate verbs in sentences instead of telling the student on what page in his book he can find the paradigm? However, if we make an effort to have our students continually hear and produce something resembling spoken Russian right from the beginning days of their study, they will be more interested, learn faster, and, in the long run, be better prepared to make the transition from the classroom to the grocery store, the restaurant, and *War and Peace*.